

STAT

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-3NEW YORK TIMES
9 January 1984

New Case of Nazi Criminal Used as Spy by U.S. Is Under Study

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

For the second time in a year, the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations has begun an inquiry into the use of a Nazi war criminal by American intelligence authorities after World War II.

The new investigation involves Robert Jan Verbelen, a Belgian SS officer and police commandant who was tried in his absence, convicted and sentenced to death for war crimes by a Belgian military court in 1947.

According to newly available United States Army documents, Mr. Verbelen worked for American counterintelligence in Vienna under a false identity from 1947 to 1956. Whether his alias was assigned to him by American agents who knew who he was — as he maintains — or whether he was successful in fooling his intelligence superiors for nine years — as Army documents indicate — are among the questions under investigation.

The 72-year-old Mr. Verbelen, who still lives in Vienna, said in a telephone interview Friday that he had organized an American spy network of 100 Soviet-bloc agents in Vienna after the war. But he denied having committed any of the crimes, including killing of Jews and mistreatment of two captured American pilots, for which he was convicted in what he portrayed as a seven-minute trial. In 1965 he was cleared by an Austrian court in the slaying of seven members of the Belgian underground.

Army Records Heavily Censored

The Army records, long classified and still heavily censored, were obtained through a Freedom of Information request by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. Justin J. Finger, an official of the Jewish rights group, said, in calling for a Federal investigation, that Mr. Verbelen still "speaks and writes regularly on pro-Nazi issues." Mr. Verbelen disputed the charge.

Stephen S. Trott, an Assistant Attorney General in the Justice Department's criminal division, wrote to the Anti-Defamation League late last month that a "review" of the case was under way. It marks the second time that the special investigations office, formed in 1978 to deport Nazi war criminals living illegally in America, has been directed to examine a case involving someone outside the country.

Last August, the special investigations office issued a long report on its findings that American counterintelligence authorities in West Germany had employed Klaus Barbie, a former Gestapo leader in occupied France, and helped him escape to South America in 1951. Mr. Barbie, who

had also been tried in his absence for war crimes and sentenced to death by a French court, was extradited from Bolivia to France last February and is now facing a new trial in Lyons.

An examination of the Verbelen records obtained from the Army suggests that, as with the Barbie case, at least some intelligence officials were ignorant of their agent's true identity. But because of the substantial material blacked out of the Army documents, many aspects remain hidden. It is not clear, for example, what the Army meant when it stated in some of the documents that Mr. Verbelen "was considered suitable for rehire."

Described as a Nazi Officer

Army intelligence files describing Mr. Verbelen's true identity say that he was born April 5, 1911, in Gerent Bei Lowen, Belgium, and that he served as an obersturmfuhrer in both the general SS, or Nazi elite guard, and the SD, the Nazi security service. The records say he commanded a police battalion and was forming a Flemish storm brigade when German troops occupied Belgium. During the Allied advance he fled to Germany and was seen in Berlin in November 1944.

Mr. Verbelen said in the interview, conducted in German, that as the Nazis retreated before the Allied advance he fled to Germany and served as chief of police, with the "theoretical" rank of general, in a Flemish exile government.

Mr. Verbelen's indictment before a military court in Brussels in 1947 charged him with having ordered and taken part in killings and torture and with having attacked a farm where two American pilots were hiding. The pilots, identified as Lieut. Nuncio B. Street and Lieut. Eugene W. Dingle, were said in court papers to have been "subjected to physical tortures" and sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp. They were said to have been liberated later by the Russians in Berlin.

The court found Mr. Verbelen guilty of 67 charges and condemned him to "death by a bullet."

Mr. Verbelen said in the interview that he was just an anti-Resistance officer who was among thousands of Flemish officers unjustly condemned to death in mass postwar trials. He called the allegations involving the fliers "a shameless lie" and said he had never seen an American pilot during the entire war.

In 1945, according to Army records, Mr. Verbelen was hired as a bartender in a United States officers' club in Zell am See, Austria. Whether he arrived under his own name is unclear. He said



Associated Press, 1965

Robert Jan Verbelen

in the interview that he had escaped from Germany with false papers but that he had told the Americans in Austria his true name.

That same year he began to work with what the Army records called, without elaboration, "U.S.A. Special Services" in Bad Hofgastein, Austria. That work was said to have ceased in 1946. The next sentence in Army documents is blacked out but it appears from Mr. Verbelen's own statements that this is when he took on other American intelligence duties.

At about this time, too, the papers indicated, he acquired a large number of aliases, including Alfred H. Schwab, Alfred Heinrich Gustave Schwab, Herbert Schwab, Peter Mayer, Herbert Charpentier, Josef Pollack, Alfred Kluger and Herbert Lehmann.

Mr. Verbelen said in the interview that the aliases had been given him by American intelligence officers. "When one name got too hot, I got another," he said. He said he was alluding here to the Russians, not the Belgians.

CONTINUED